

July 14, 2013

**Amos 7:7-17**; Luke 10:25-37

Plumb Lines in an Out of Kilter World

Over the years I have become more adept at building things

- last year I built an 8x10 shed from ground up using my own plans
- 2 years ago extended and replanked my deck in cedar, a deck my dad and I had built about 13 years ago
- and about 10 years ago finished out our basement.

However, I was not always so handy.

Though my dad was a contractor, I had a hard time learning how to do things his way – so I did much by trial and error

- I had my share of tearing things down and starting over again when I worked for my dad in my latter years of high school and early college.

I remember one job.

My dad was doing some fix-up work for a couple who lived in an old St. Catharines mansion, overlooking the historic 12-mile Creek

- the house needed a lot of work.

When summer came and I joined my dad, my dad put me to a task.

The couple had an old 1920s garage out back that they wanted to turn into an artist's studio.

It overlooked the 12-mile Creek, had a metal roof, wooden walls with barn style wood.

My dad gave me the responsibility to frame in the garage door, get the inside ready for dry-walling, tar the metal roof, in order to turn this old garage into a studio.

My first challenge was enclosing the garage door opening. What should I do?

This old garage had settled over the years

- the building was slanted just a bit
- about 4" from floor to ceiling
- the floor was not level – this building was not plumb, level, or square

The owners did not want us to straighten the building

- there was a certain charm in its being "out of plumb."

In deciding to frame the 10' door opening with studs, I made the novice mistake of aligning my studs with the lean

- the akilter studs fit right in with the rest of the leaning garage.

When my dad inspected my progress, he made me tear it all down and start over and this time for me to use a level (vertically) to ensure the studs would be the only vertically straight thing in this out of kilter studio.

The prophet Amos is called by God, and given a vision of God holding a level vertically or plumb line to the people of Israel  
– so that Israel might see how much they have strayed from being aligned with God and the purposes of God.

Amos was just a shepherd taking care of sheep in Judah, but then he heard God's voice, God's call to be a mouthpiece for God.

He was compelled by God to speak  
– not to his own people, but the people of Israel to the north  
– who were living in ways that rejected God's ways,

He was to reveal to them their disloyalty to God – involvement in idol worship

Their being unconcerned with what concerned God – bribery, corruption, and oppression of the poor.

And so Amos came sharing a vision – in fact five visions. This vision in Amos 7: 7ff is the third of five visions to the house of Israel – of the judgment that is Israel brings upon herself for their rejecting being aligned with God.

Judgment is not so much an act of God, than it is the outcome of Israel's disobedience.

Israel, thought all they needed to be was Israel – they were the privileged ones, the religious elite.

When Amos came on the scene, a priest from Bethel, Amaziah, ratted on him to the king.

Amaziah told Amos to get lost – you are messing with the religious system we have set up – we like it the way it is.

The religion they held was shaped to benefit them, to benefit the powerful, to benefit the ones who had the wealth and influence.

No one wanted a prophet to mess with their Jewish Civil religion.

As a result religion became oppressive.

And as Eugene Peterson expresses:

“more people are exploited and abused in the cause of religion than in any other way. Sex, money, and power all take a back seat to religion as a source of evil” (*The Message*, 1641)

So maybe John Lennon had it right in his song *Imagine* – seeing the tendency of religion, civil religion, and nationhood to misuse power:

Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky  
Imagine all the people living for today

Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too  
Imagine all the people living life in peace

Eugene Peterson continues, “The moment a person (or government or religion or organization) is convinced that God is either ordering or sanctioning a cause or project, anything goes.

The history, worldwide, of religion-fueled hate, killing and oppression is staggering. The biblical prophets are in the front line of those doing something about it”

– and “among these prophets, Amos towers as defender of the downtrodden poor and accuser of the powerful rich who use God’s name to legitimize their sin” (*The Message*, 1641)

And lest we think we are not like Israel, we hear Amos as if he is speaking to the privileged religious people of North America.

The civil religion of the United States has so been mixed in with our nationhood, economy, and militaristic dominance.

We have come to believe that we are God’s privileged people to such an extent that God is almost caricatured as Uncle Sam who blesses the American dream and the American agenda in the world

– Thank God I am American!

And as we worship and pray with fellow worshipers, who regard themselves just as privileged, we need prophets like Amos to see how crooked, out-of-kilter our walls, our lives have become.

When we measure our lives by our national identity, our economic status, our places of privilege, **it is impossible to truly see how self serving our believing in God has become.**

And so we hear Amos:

“This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand. <sup>8</sup> And the LORD asked me, “What do you see, Amos?”

“A plumb line,” I replied.

Then the Lord said, “Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.”

**We often misinterpret the language of judgment.**

“I will spare them no longer” is often regarded as God stepping in and ending our privilege – but that is to misread and misunderstand what God is saying.

What God is saying, “I will no longer extend grace, overlook your abuse and exploitation – I will no longer keep you from the consequences of your actions.”

This is not the language of Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson – God judging America; it is God’s chastisement of God’s people for aligning ourselves with America – forgetting that we are God’s people because we had been transformed in being aligned with God.

When we hear God say this, we wonder why God is turning away from us, rejecting us  
– but that is to still see our plight from the perspective of our selfishness  
– we are oblivious to the fact that we had been accepted by God  
– we were aligned, plumb  
– but now we are the ones who have turned from God, from God’s ways  
– we have rejected God’s direction and sought our own  
– we no longer are aligned with God and the purposes of God.

**And so the realization of judgment upon us is that: God has not left us, we have left God**  
– and we begin to see how far we have strayed from God’s just ways, **when Amos bothers us holding a plumb line among us.**

The plumb line brings awareness.

Our actions are skewed to benefit ourselves.

In our place of privilege we are insensitive to the conditions of those struggling around us.

Our freedom blinds us to the fear and repression we have fostered among the ones - who cannot support their family on minimum wage,  
- the ones left to sleep in their cars or shelters,  
- the ones succumbing to their illness because they cannot afford access to healthcare,  
- the immigrant who is unable to get the proper documents to live and work here without fear  
- and, minorities who do not share in our rights.

But what do we do when the plumb line of God’s righteousness and justice are brought alongside of us.

Many like Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, tell the one holding the plumb to take a hike, get out of here, mind your own business  
– don’t mess with what we have  
– we like the way we are “blessed.”

And in response – do we wonder why God stands back and no longer holds back the consequences of our unjust actions?

“Therefore this is what the LORD says:  
““Your wife will become a prostitute in the city,  
and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword.  
Your land will be measured and divided up,  
and you yourself will die in a pagan country.  
And Israel will surely go into exile,  
away from their native land.””

The injustice we mete out upon others backfires and as the weak become the powerful, the poor demand their economic piece of the pie, the stranger enacts retribution in gaining a place to put their feet, we for the first time sense oppression.

Paulo Freire has stated that when the oppressed overthrow the oppressors, they become the oppressors because they know no other way.

Revolution, oppression, injustice begets more revolution, injustice and oppression – nothing brings peace.

And so those who have experienced violence, respond to violence with violence (just look at the news of the Middle East.)

For justice to prevail,

For peace, shalom to dwell in the land

– the powerful and privileged humble themselves; no longer keep hold of their privilege

– but seek to act with justice and righteousness

– aligning ourselves with the plumb-line of God's justice.

Our model is the Good Samaritan in dealing with one another – in being debased, he does not respond in the way he is treated. Rather the Samaritan offers hospitality to anyone in need; putting the needs and well-being of others ahead of himself.

In being like the Samaritan, we do not only give justice, but justice becomes the way we live and act among one another

– a new norm for how people treat one another

= this is the reason for our participating with God in God's mission.

And so our **daily task** involves confessing how blinded we become to God's ways due to our privilege.

And rather than hiding behind the comfort of our religion, we need to note God's plumb-line and ask the Spirit of God to align our lives with God and God's purposes.

May we be kept uncomfortable in a society that seeks to misalign us to the things of God.

May we measure our alignment with God by heeding God's word

– aware of the orphan, the widow, the sick, the oppressed, the stranger, the alien and immigrant, the poor and the powerless, the discriminated.

We discover ourselves being aligned when we step away from our walks and places of comfort and learn to walk in new ways

– ways among the poor, the powerless, the widow, the orphan, the sick, the oppressed

– for us also to be changed by the Gospel of Jesus

– **to live aligned with God.**